Allies and Allyship in LIS

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ABSTRACT

In LIS, there needs a better understanding of what it means to be an ally and to engage with allyship, as well as how these concepts are perceived and defined by both those who are carrying out actions, as well as those who are receiving the intended support. This research focuses on the definitions of and the behaviors associated with being an ally and participating in allyship amongst professionals in LIS in the United States.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

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AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI); Ally; Allyship

INTRODUCTION

Given the social tumult over the past few years, the concept of being an ally, or allyship, has become a popular talking point for many in the LIS professions. Acting as an ally is a common step in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategies. The term is used to describe individuals with power and privilege providing support and assistance to marginalized groups and individuals, including LIS professionals, staff, library users, or community members. Despite the prevalence of its use, the concept of ally is not well-defined resulting in different understandings and expectations. The concepts of Ally and Allyship are regularly applied to a variety of intentions and actions, ranging from declaring support on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to speaking up in public to actively engaging through volunteering, protests, and funding. Even when carried out with the best of intentions, these actions are not

always perceived as allyship by the groups they are intended to help. Instead, they can often be viewed as inadequate or posturing, done mainly to benefit the ally by relieving feelings of guilt. To effectively engage in allyship, it is important to build a common understanding of what it means to be an ally and how that translates to the practice of allyship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the term is both a verb and a noun, ally in the context of this paper is focused on a person and the actions they take. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 6th ed. ally is defined as "one who is allied with another" or "one in helpful association with another". The *Oxford English Dictionary* expands on this, defining ally as a "person who helps or cooperates with another; a supporter, an associate; a friend." Both definitions highlight the importance of help, support, and cooperation, what that actually entails is still open to interpretation. Within the context of EDI work, the concept of ally is better defined, noting that it is "a relationship between people or relationships that people have to a cause or struggle for change…a person-centered or principle-centered relationship or both" (Agosto, 2014). However, while more focused, it is still a definition that can be perceived differently by the person or group carrying out an action and the person or group receiving the intended assistance.

In comparison, the term Allyship can be more precisely defined and is considered to be an active process, one that requires not only effort, but also emotional labor. According to the *OED*, it is "the state or condition of being a person who supports the rights of a minority or marginalized group without being a member of it." It requires a "continuous, reflexive practice…[that leverages] one's position of power" (Erskine & Bilimoria, 319) and acts as a "strategic mechanism..[to] fight injustice and promote equality..through supportive personal relationships and public acts" (Melaku, et. al). Despite a more precise definition, allyship is still open to a wide range of interpretations depending on point of view.

The lack of a clear definition of what makes one an ally often leads to a negative perception of allies, especially self-proclaimed allies. It is easy to claim to be an ally if there is not a distinct understanding of the expectations of effort needed as part of the process. This is so common that the Urban Dictionary has a definition for allyship fatigue, noting it is when "lazy ass people who use their privilege to stop advocating for the group that is being discriminated against." This highlights the problem of people stating they are allies, yet limiting their involvement once things become difficult, real effort is needed, and/or a perceived lack of gratitude from those being 'helped'. Contributors to allyship fatigue may stem from allies not questioning assumptions about how their own experiences compare, not acknowledging their own privilege, and not considering how both have contributed to supporting existing institutional and societal racial practices and institutions (Melaku, et.al).

As with diversity, discussions of ally and allyship generally center on difference and identifying solutions without recognizing the complexity and ongoing evolution needed. Sara Ahmed (2007) addresses the issues of not better defining diversity and the impact on EDI initiatives and practices in higher education, much of which applies to discussions of allies and allyship. "If

diversity [ally and allyship] is not tied down as a concept, or is not even understood as signifying something in particular, there are clearly risks, in the sense that people can then define 'diversity' [ally and allyship] in a way that may actually block action" (Ahmed, p. 240). Claiming actions and statements as allyship without a clear understanding of how they contribute, what is needed, and one's own privilege and power may actually result in creating barriers rather than solving problems.

Within this conversation, the role of whiteness and white privilege must be included, especially when we talk about power and privilege. There is a significant underrepresentation of people of color in LIS (BLS, 2021), which implies that those with power and privilege are usually white. These are the individuals who make the decisions regarding EDI initiatives. What results can be "race-based performativeness…[that] emerges from a "white gaze" in a hegemonically entrenched whiteness of culture that parallels the "male gaze" in globalized patriarch and chauvinistic heteronormativity" (Mehra, p. 138). The impact of whiteness is not limited to policy. As VanScoy and Bright (2019) note the "normative nature of whiteness in LIS has led to the lack of exploration of the varied experiences of minority librarians in the research literature" (VanScoy & Bright, 286-287). Research is an important influence on perceptions of the profession and the education and training of LIS workers and professionals. It becomes more challenging to identify and define allyship when we do not sufficiently address the role of whiteness and white privilege in professional practice, policy making, and research.

LIS as a profession has been trying to improve equity, diversity and inclusion for over three decades. Yet, it continues to be an ongoing struggle to make significant headway. "Efforts to diversify the profession are unlikely to be successful if we do not address the persistence and prevalence of racism within" (Alabi, p. 47) the profession. One possible step is to build a better understanding of what it means to be an ally and to engage with allyship. This includes learning how these concepts are understood perceived and defined by those who are carrying out actions as well as the needs and expectations of those receiving the intended support of the various initiative, actions, and polices

METHODS AND FINDINGS

This research focuses on the definitions of and the behaviors associated with being an ally and participating in allyship amongst professionals in LIS in the United States. The study builds on the work of Erskine and Bilimoria (2019), which proposed a definition of white allyship in support of Afro-Diasporic women and identified motivators and detractors of allyship behavior. The behavior of professionals with privilege and power can support or impede the career development of professionals from marginalized groups (p. 320). As a result, understanding the factors that support white allyship behavior can inform professional development and personal actions to increase the capacity of other white professionals to enact allyship behavior, with long-term potential for increasing the number of professionals of color in LIS organizations.

The research focuses on the professional LIS community and will be conducted in two phases: a survey to collect data on definitions and actions of allies and in-depth interviews to explore the concepts, ideas, and definitions identified in the survey. The survey was closed in January 2022 and the collation and analysis of was conducted over the course of Spring and Summer 2022.

The second phase of the research, in-depth interviews, was conducted over Summer 2022. The data from the second phase is still being collated for analysis.

This presentation will address the results of the survey portion of the research. The survey was distributed via listserves via ALA, ALISE, and other LIS professional organizations, social media, and personal networks (friends and colleagues) to reach a wide range of LIS professionals. The survey included questions about how one defines ally and allyship, how this definition aligns with Erskine and Bilimoria (2019) definition, and identifying their own or other's actions that can be seen as allyship behavior. We also asked for demographic information for analyzing the data in the aggregate, including the option "prefer not to answer". Additionally, we asked participants about their of library, information institution, or educational institution affiliation.

The survey data was reviewed and analyzed by both investigators, as well as the graduate assistant. Several themes emerged from the analysis, including: the role and use of power, using ally versus allyship, who can define ally, intention, recognition, privilege, institutional barriers, DEI work, talking/listening to BIPOC, passive work, collaboration, and who can be an ally. Additionally, The analysis included reviewing the entirety of the data collected and parsing out answers based on ethnicity based on answers to demographic data in order to compare and contrast definition, word choice, and perceptions of ally and allyship. While there were strong similarities between the group breakdowns, there are also strong contrasts that need to be interrogated on a deeper level, which has begun in the review of the interviews conducted in Summer 2022. Overall, the research and analysis highlight the importance a strong common understanding of the concepts of Ally and Allyship in LIS. They are incredibly important in how we approach teaching EDI in LIS programs and how we as educators engage with DEI concepts as we work towards improving inclusivity and diversity in the profession. The presentation will address the findings and introduce the next steps for the research.

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